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A DEAD MAN'S MEMOIR (A THEATRICAL NOVEL)-A METAFICTION CAUGHT BETWEEN THE COGS OF THE MACHINERY OF HISTORY AND THEATRE?

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ABSTRACT

A Dead Man's Memoir is a unique Russian 'Roman a clef' written by Mikhail Bulgakov that unusually dissolves the demarcation between history and fiction. An amalgamation of the three genres of memoir, theatre and the novel it tells the absurd struggle of a creator, his 'year of prosperity' followed too soon by a 'year of catastrophe'. In a game of snakes and ladders he is fed to the insatiate whim of the dice. Sergei Maksudov's abortive revolt against the curtailment of creative freedom is narrated dramatically through incidents of dark humour, ridiculous devotion, illusive hope and 'nightmarish dreams with misplaced loveliness'. The fine line between the living and the dead, sanity and insanity, story and propaganda, creative freedom and expurgation are dexterously weighed in the face of Soviet repression. This paper examines the explosion and implosion of the artistic voice garbled by the written word of History and the cens(u/o)ring of dynamic Theatre.

KEYWORDS: Roman a Clef, Memoir, History, Theatre, Metafiction, Historiography, Historiographic Metafiction

Anyone who believes you can't change history has never tried to write his memoirs.

-David Ben Gurion.

INTRODUCTION

The Self-Reflexivity of Art provides us with an opportunity to view, review, reassess and re-examine the possibilities and probabilities of the particular form in question. Art becomes both the 'created' and the 'critiqued'. Writers embrace 'metafiction' to delineate the subtleties of the chosen form. Metafiction- the prefix 'meta' means 'beyond' or 'transcending'; the term metafiction literally means 'beyond fiction'. Fiction, here, is to be taken as literary art in its broadest sense.

> Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing, which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality … such writings … also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (Waugh 2).

This urges us to interrogate the apparently taken for granted claims of Art in general. Art is problematized when seen as 'Propaganda' or 'Protest'. It is here that History and the art of writing it- 'Historiography' becomes pertinent for:

History is a cyclic poem written by time upon the memories of man.

-Percy Bysshe Shelley

History as Perspectivism: In describing a Klee painting named '*Angelus Novus*' in his ninth thesis in the essay, '*Theses on the Philosophy of History'*, Walter Benjamin talks about a specific and unique engagement with the past yet being aware of a consciousness of the present, that shatters the continuum of History. Thus the 'cyclic reality' of History is realized. History then is a 'heap of re-presentations' (qtd. in Redmond, "On the Concept of History", par. 9). However, Jacques Derrida takes it a step further with his radical concept of 'Deconstruction'. He questions the originality of the so called original to be represented. Thereby History is only a heap of re-presentations and its imagined original was already characterized by irreducible or transcendent heterogeneity of representations.

Foucault had once said that 'effective history' affirms knowledge as perspective. Thus the 'recorded facts' are nothing but 'perspectives' created within individual spheres of 'nepotistic patronage' and 'prejudices'. The establishment of this is quite relevant to our analysis of *A Dead Man's Memoir*.

The many forms: Metafiction and Historiographic Metafiction: Linda Hutcheon differentiates the terms 'metafiction' and 'historiographic metafiction'. She says that:

> Historiographic metafiction, in deliberate contrast to what I call late modernist radical metafiction attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical, and it does so both thematically and formally" (289).

Works are labelled 'historiographic metafictions' because of their conscious self-reflexivity and concern with history. The earliest histories contain fictional elements. They are implicit amalgamations of fact and myth. The composition of the word 'history' itself contains the word 'story'. But, in later years, history was constructed into something that represents 'objective facts' and the novel as representing 'subjective fiction'. The storyteller within the body of the historian was forgotten. Historiographic metafiction bridge the fissures between historical and fictional works by recombining the two genres. To accomplish this re-presentation of the past, historiographic metafiction plays with the truth (not only its verities, but its varieties) of historical records. Mikhail Bulgakov makes an attempt to emphasize this through the '*Memoir*'. This '*Memoir'* is a frame narrative critiquing two significant forms, namely 'novel' and 'drama' within the contours of the established first. A memoir contains autobiographical elements, but focuses on a particular incident or episode of the concerned person's life. The 'dead man' here is none other than the Russian playwright and novelist Bulgakov (Maksudov) whose 'death-in-existence' exemplified by his 'year of catastrophe' is narrated and dramatized. His purpose however is not to change History but to record how History changes with every conversation (narrative-mostly grand!)

Histroy

which usually

changes slowly

changes sometimes

during a single conversation (Shrish 76)

The year 1929 changed his life for the worse when his conversation with the public was misunderstood by the 'Glavlit' and other Soviet organizations responsible for literary censorship. HIS-(s) tory was altered and misconstrued. Keith Gessen in his 'Introduction' to the *Memoir* describes the writer's misfortunes as follows:

> A long and brutal campaign against him by Party critics had culminated in the removal of all his plays from the Moscow stage; his prose works had stopped passing the censorship years earlier. "Everything is banned," he wrote to Maxim Gorky that summer, "and I am ruined, slandered, all alone." A theatre to which he'd sold a play, since pulled from the repertoire because of the censorship, asked for the advance back. Not long after, visitors to a leading avant-garde Moscow theatre could watch a play that included "Bulgakov" in its "dictionary of dead words" – alongside 'bureaucracy', 'bohemia' and 'bagels'. The literary semi-autobiography that he started that summer (1929) would eventually be called A Dead Man's Memoir, not only because its narrator commits suicide at the end but because its author, too, felt dead (xi).

The widely recognized translations of the original manuscripts are as follows:

Black Snow: A Theatrical Novel (1967) (Translator: Michael Glenny).

A Dead Man's Memoir: A Theatrical Novel (2007) (Translator: Andrew Bromfield).

This Paper will adhere to the second publication. Interestingly the first publication has an 'Afterword' whereas the second has the same text as the 'Foreword'. The rest of the novel is, however, identical with its two parts consisting of a total of sixteen chapters. The 'Foreword' itself presents the general satirical vein of the memoir. It is bizarre and there is sufficient aesthetic distancing from the form to come. A paradoxical juxtaposition of an apparently 'objective' foreword with a 'subjective' form further complicates the idea of 'fiction' and story telling. The 'I' of the foreword is unidentified, and in a sense serves as a disclaimer: the whole novel is revealed as a 'found text' but whether based on people who really had existed, remains ambiguous. If the 'I' of the Afterword is Bulgakov, for example, then there are further problems. The author of the foreword denies that Maksudov (the 'I' of the novel') was ever a playwright and that he was always only a junior employee of the newspaper 'The Shipping Herald' yet in the translator's 'Introduction' we are told that 'The Shipping Herald' is a disguise for 'The Siren', a magazine for which Bulgakov worked as a staff reporter and a feature writer. Also Maksudov's 'suicide' is declared as resulting from his 'melancholia' but when we read the very last line of the novel, we do not encounter anyone falling off the Tsepnoi Bridge as mentioned in the 'Foreword'. The 'suicide' could be a metaphor for the death of creativity and artistic sensibilities. Some like to call the novel as incomplete and also incoherent with the aforementioned end in the 'Foreword' but a natural ending is in progress for Maksudov as anticipated in the production of his play. Bulgakov deliberately ends it in a non-committal fashion, maybe because he still hopes that theatre can be redeemed and also hopes to maintain the autonomy of his work against all odds!

Bulgakov urges us to advance the 'fringed curtains' of our eyes to see beyond the ordinary tenable stage: the various machinations at work, the green-eyed specters of contemporary overrated peers and the rigorous mechanisms of acting postulated and practiced by Stanislavsky.

> *When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign that the dunces are all in confederacy against him.*
>
> **– Jonathan Swift.**

It is precisely this that had taken place in the life of Bulgakov, disguised as Maksudov in the '*Memoir*'. In the novel, his name is first unpopular; drowned in the crass writings published in the *'The Shipping Herald'*, then a struggling artist who in a comic turn of events escapes suicide only to live a life far worse than death. Later, his name gets the privilege of being placed next to classical writers (on the theatre poster) quite to the consternation of his apparently successful and knowledgeable friends who seem to flaunt an expert understanding of Theatre. This is not to honour his genius but because of political conveniences that favoured a contemporary pro-active play to be placed in the repertoire. Much later his name, the very first construct of his identity is forgotten, re-christened and erroneously acclaimed by the lorgnette wearing 'old man' Ivan Vasilievich who is a burlesque portrayal of Stanislavsky, famous for his 'Method Acting' and 'System' being the co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, here described as the Independent Theatre.

A Tryst with Independence. Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault in a debate on '*Human Nature and Power' s*ay the following:

> **Chomsky**: A fundamental element of human nature is the need for creative work, for creative inquiry, for free creation without the arbitrary limiting factors of coercive institutions… (the) appropriate form of social organization for an advanced technological society in which the human beings do not have to be forced into a position of being as tools as cogs in a wheel machine in which the creative urge that is intrinsic in human nature will in fact realize itself in whatever way it will.
>
> **Foucault**: The power is in the hands of the government and is exerted by some particular institution such as local government, the police, the army. These institutions transmit the orders, apply them and punish people who don't obey… but I think political power, which seem to be independent actually isn't
>
> (YouTube video: Dutch Television, 1971).

Such an institution is the Soviet Stage portrayed in the '*Memoir'*. Bulgakov takes us on a scathing tour of the Russian theatre, censorship, and Communism in general. When Maksudov enters the world of theatre, he sets foot into a bolus of egotistic and rampaging idiocy. It drives him to the edge of his sanity. His only solace in the novel, a friend and a 'somewhat theatre guide' Pyotr Bombardov, an actor by profession tells him not to take it to heart:

> It's just that you don't know what the theatre's like. There are complicated machines in the world, but the theatre is the most complicated of all?"

As the protagonist, Ignatius Reilly of Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* believes that 'rota Fortunae' (wheel of fortune) had thrust him into a vicious cycle, his wheel rapidly spinning downward (31), so was the cycle of Bulgakov who presents to us his almost a decade old association with the Moscow Art Theatre. It is quite ironic that he calls it the Independent Theatre. He loses his independence, creative zeal and authority and he almost does not recognize his own work by the time it is ready for performance. Just like Ignatius, his ardent love for writing consoles him through unmanageable situations and atrocities committed in the name of expurgation on his dramatized novel, Black Snow.

His love for writing is also accompanied by his 'fear of writing'. This fear, however, is momentary. Derrida explains his 'fear of writing' as follows:

> Each time that I write something it feels like I'm advancing into a new territory, somewhere I haven't been before and this type of advance often demands certain gestures that can be taken as aggressive with regard to other thinkers or colleagues. I'm not someone who is polemical but it's true that deconstructive gestures appear to destabilize or cause anxiety or even hurt others- so every time that I make this type of gesture there are moments of fear. This doesn't happen at the moments when I'm writing. Actually, when I write there is a feeling of necessity of something that is stronger than myself that demands that I must write as I write (YouTube video: 'Fear of Writing').

Similarly, in Maksudov, the reader finds a 'fear' that lingers only in the dawn, when the conscious mind reminds him of the ramifications to be faced, but in the night he is content with his box of creative talent, a parade of characters and the distant sound of a piano. He is perfectly in harmony with his thoughts. In the novel, we find it thus:

> On looking more closely and screwing up my eyes, I became convinced that it was a picture. And even more, that it was not a flat picture but a three-dimensional one, like a little box, and in it, through the lines of words, I could see a light burning and the same figures that were described in the novel moving about…
>
> As time went by, the chamber in the book acquired sounds. I quite clearly heard the sounds of a piano…
>
> Then one night I decided to describe this magical chamber…
>
> Music lying open on the piano. They are playing Faust. Suddenly Faust falls

> silent, but a guitar starts to play. Who is playing? There he is, entering through the door, holding the guitar. I listen-he sings. I write: 'He sings'…by the end of the third night I realized that I was writing a play (40-42).

He is also very faithful to his muse when he rejects mendacity, casting aside the words of caution of Bombardov during his fateful meeting with Stanislavsky. He fervently defends the autonomy of his work.

> You are an inflexible man! But then, your play is good too", said Ivan Vasilievich, peering at me keenly. 'Now all you have to do is write it and everything will be ready…'
>
> I left the room on unsteady legs and glanced at the black Ostrovsky with my head pounding. (107)

Maksudov glances at the bust of Ostrovsky, the famous dramatist who founded Moscow's Maly Theatre almost wishing for his descend as a 'deus ex machina' to resolve his rather insolvable conflicts with the Stage.

Nonconformance. What is his 'fear' then? Bulgakov records all the ways in which one can be disheartened. Maksudov quits his job, signs a publishing contract, only to learn that he has been cheated by the editor who flees the country with his manuscripts. This incident is a clear reference to the editor, Isai Lezhnev and the publisher, Zakhar Leontievich Kagansky depicted in the novel as Ilya Ivanovich Rudolfi and Makar Rvatsky respectively.

His trip to the bookshop to buy the writings of his contemporaries: from the greatest (the world-travelling Bondarevsky) to the least (the unctuous Likospastov) results in utter dismay for he finds them all to be shallow.

"I had not derived any new insights: from the books of the very finest writers", laments Maksudov,

> I had not, so to speak, discovered any paths, not glimpsed any lights shining ahead, and I felt sick and tired of everything. And, like a worm, there began gnawing at my heart the appalling thought that is would never actually make any kind of a writer. And immediately I came face to face with an even more terrible thought: what if I turned out like Likospastov? (39-40).

This was his 'fear' but he definitely triumphed over it in the end. The end here refers to the 'successes of Bulgakov's works though earned posthumously. He did not turn out like Likospastov (Yuri Slyozkin in real life).

> He turned out like no one else, a genuine original, who kept alive a great tradition in a time that seemed hell-bent on destroying it (xxi).

Thus his fear is not the fear of authoritative dictums that restricts a creative artist or the fear of accomplishing recognition (the tedious task of getting his works published) but if his writings (when penned down with sufficient inspiration of which there prevailed severe paucity in the contemporary scenario) would be received as something 'above'

shallow, hollow, Likospastovian stories.

The Key Factor._As a stunning Roman a clef also known as a 'key novel' in English, the '*Memoir'* depicts actual persons under fictitious names. The genre developed in 17th century France and usually the author would provide us with the 'key' later. However, no key follows this '*Memoir'*. The author does not take pains to disguise the real life characters. This should not be interpreted as a thinly-veiled portrayal of real life characters. He does so for a reason. His intention are not to merely parody them, but to also state the damage done by multiple role playing and vain glorious activities in the real world as opposed to those very skills lacking on the stage! The perfect example of this would be the extravagant party attended by Maksudov in the fifth chapter. People are more animated and various intriguing scripts are at work and the atmosphere is so very claustrophobic. The first instance of the 'verfremdung effekt' is felt by Maksudov when he struggles to fit into the crowd. The satirical caricatures are truly vicious. Yet another instance is when he encounters an impresario (at Rudolfi's office) who is incapable of remembering the playwright's name. He is highly opinionated, full of biting criticism and dismissive posturing until he realizes that the author is listening in on his comments and then he does an instant, blushing volte-face. His presence at the party heightens the awkwardness of the evening when the young man tries shamelessly to make up for his unthoughtful barrage of derision exhibited earlier.

When we consider the device of 'disguises', there is a kind of disguising that is in operation. The actual disguise is of 'Theatre' itself. The Independent Stage serves as the mask for the ugly faces of 'Bowdlerization', 'Political Maneuvering' and 'Literary Censorship'. His dramatized novel became an ideological battlefield hosting two important belligerents namely, the old aristocracy and the rabid revolutionary critics who drank a little too much of 'Socialism'.

Art was synonymous with propaganda yet there was a demand for fresh unrestrained contemporary outlook. Bulgakov as well as his alter ego (Maksudov) were caught between these two eccentric postulates. Soviet Theatre was very much partisan those days. Ever since the October Revolution it had been on the front line in the struggle for socialism. The credo of the Soviet Stage in the words of Yevgeny Vakhtangov, one of the giants of Russian Theatre:

> The artist will be held responsible…If the artist wishes to create something 'new', to engage in creative work after the advent of the Revolution, then he should create together with the people. Not for the people, not on their behalf, not from outside the people, but together with them (qtd.in Davidow 66).

What was amiss here is that, it failed to embrace the change. How well could the Russian society adapt itself to these 'new changes' especially during the civil war period (1917-1922)?

Oleg Yefremov, Director of the Moscow Art Theatre (1973) describes the insurmountable obstacles as follows:

> Our society demands plays which deal with today's complex conditions and problems linked with the course of development in our country and in the rest of the world. It's all part of a definite progressive process. And the problems arising out of this process are of profound concern to Art and Theatre, as an implement of Art. Thus, the demands not only exist, they press upon art and the

> theatre's doors. And the still existing influences of conservative thinking interfere with the theatre's role in responding fully to these demands (qtd.in Davidow 97).

In the novel, we find that his play when read to Ivan Vasilievich incurs the following reactions (rather 'imprecations' for the playwright):

Firstly, the characters were too young and ridiculous changes (like the character of the young sister to be transformed into a 55 year old mother) had to be made. Secondly, the gun-shot scene was to be removed, the so called saving grace was that a knife could replace the revolver. Thirdly, a 'profound psychological drama' was somehow needed to replace the original of Maksudov's.

To all these absurd suggestions, the author pictures himself entering a house he had built with great detail, but had not anticipated for the roof to collapse! Subsequently, the masks of Theatre are all torn down and the naked aggrandizement of 'histrionics' instead of the 'dramatic' is clearly portrayed. The antics of Ludmila and the idiosyncrasies of Ivan Vasilievich fall under the above mentioned category. Though the novel employs fictitious names and labels, to name a few that have not been mentioned previously: contemporaries, Izmail Alexandrovich Bondarevsky (Alexei Tolstoy), Egor Agapynov (Boris Pilnyak); co-founder of the Independent Theatre, Aristarkh Platonovich (Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko); the 'novel' itself is a reference to Bulgakov's *The White Guard* which was dramatized into the play *The Days of the Turbins* (*Black Snow* in the '*Memoir*'); Soviet Journal '*Motherland*' (*Russia*), thus the word 'fictitious' has to be used with a lot of caution. For if one is not familiar with the theatrical climate of the early 1920s and 30s, then the 'key' has been lost forever. Another important 'disguise' is that of the playwright himself. He dons the roles given to him by his publishers, directors and contractors. The vivid descriptions of jargonized contracts and forms heighten the chicanery of theatrical bureaucracy.

> I read the contract and can say quiet honestly that I didn't understand a thing and did not even try to understand anything…I recall the phrases 'should there be' and 'insofar as' occurred quite frequently in the contract and that every point began with the words: 'The author does not have the right…'(57).

These two 'disguises' are thrust upon 'Theatre' and the 'Author' with Charlatan techniques. Neither of them want to wear the 'masks' but the machinery of History and Politics 'interpellate' (have desired identities conferred on them) them as their 'subjects'. Maksudov is Bulgakov's 'theatrical split', maybe a character from the magic chamber, conceived after a nightmare as in the case of the novel. The 'key' to understand a single man's record of his 'trials and tumults ' is to share the passion he held for theatre. He was not married to it, though that's how he captions his last chapter (*A Successful Marriage)*. He had a hot scandalous and turbulent affair with it. His undying lust and addiction for 'Theatre' is explained thus:

> Consumed by my love for the Independent Theatre, pinned to it as I now like a beetle to a cork, in the evenings I attended the performances...(167).

All the stages of The Stage.

Curtain Raiser

The dramatic suicide attempt sprouts the first connection with Theatre. From Ilchin's (Director, Experimental Stage, Independent Theatre) terse letter to the lifting of the revolver and its eventual replacement; the arrival of Mephistopheles (Rudolfi) to the first acquaintance with Theatre, every single description and portrayal serves as an exposition to the glorious stage. The stepwise progression into the various rooms of the Theatre Building coupled with references to exotic locales heightens the dramatic quality of the novel. The walk in the gallery and other explorations has the ambience of a 'seduction scene'. His enchantment with Theatre reaches the pinnacle of satisfaction. The caricatures of stage hands, organizers, directors, actors, actresses, couriers, and the two secretaries of the founders present to us a 'tableau vivant'.

The Main Stage

The golden horse, the ribbon bearing the inscription 'To Our Beloved Independent Theatre…' and the inspiring stories behind every venerated portrait speak about the legacy of the stage. Maksudov's admiration for the stage is quite infectious at this level. The reader drowns each description in his/her own imaginative estuary. To name one such important story encapsulated in a portrait: General Komarovsky-Billancourt's transformation into an actor after watching a moving performance. At the end of Bombardov's narration, Maksudov remarks:

> It is so fine here in your theatre that if I were in the general's place I would
>
> have acted in exactly the same way (53).

There is also an equally ardent portrayal of the antics of certain actors who devour the beauty of the Stage in the name of acting. A perfect example of this would be actress, Ludmila Silvestrovna Pryakhina. The following is Maksudov's verdict on her acting or 'call it what you will':

> An actress, who tried to represent the lament of a person who is persecuted and
>
> downtrodden, and played it so badly that a cat went crazy and tore a curtain to
>
> shreds, cannot act at all (133).

The various readings of the play and the subsequent waning of artistic fervor; the typing of the play amidst the myriad distractions; the meeting with the founders, a charade of unworthy detractors; the self criticism and satirical nightmares of the author; the actual mockery of his skill by vainglorious writers and the tragic-comic article in the '*Melpomene's Face*' (magazine) all saturate the dramatic aspects of the novel.

The actual performance of the play is not depicted. We are left to ponder upon the rehearsals instead. This is where the actual satirical part of the tawdry theatre techniques is lampooned. The author doubts the rigorous methods of Stanislavsky. The credentials of the theatre-genius are not dubious, but Maksudov is suspicious of the practicality of the 'system'.

> I went home from the rehearsal full of impressions of new and remarkable
>
> things and thinking as follows:

> 'Yes, this is all astonishing. But it is only astonishing because I am an ignoramus in these matters…To the uninitiated it appears strange that instead of proceeding directly to operate on his patient, a doctor first does all sorts of strange things to him…' (162).

The comic inclusion of a prop-hand in the exercise cycle for Ivan Vasilievich, the absurd jotting down of notes by Ludmila and the other routines that the actors had to perform even though they were in no way connected to the scene did not settle well on the nerves of Maksudov. As time writes the History of man and Theatre, Maksudov begins to delude himself by believing in the praxis of Ivan Vasilievich's system. The novel ends with an Aposiopesis (…) where the sentence is deliberately broken off and left unfinished, the ending is to be supplied by our imagination. The open ended dénouement suggests the growth and ongoing process of theatrical creations and performances, but whether it can successfully find a way to withstand the shackles of History and Politics is left for us to decide!

To Never Draw the Curtain

Myth, memory, history-these are three alternative ways to capture and account for an elusive past, each with its own persuasive claim.

-Warren I. Susman

As time progresses, the magic chamber gradually disappears and a little before the end of the '*Memoir'* we find Bombardov and Maksudov keeping 'wake'. A vigil held over a living corpse, a few nights before the burial of creative freedom. *A Dead Man's Memoir* is a heightened dramatic portrayal of the tragedy of an aspiring author. It is a novel of struggles, momentary triumphs and subtle social conditioning that appears not under the visible spectrum of reality. Thus Bulgakov effaces the gap between objectivity and subjectivity. For 'objectivity' is nothing but standardized 'subjectivity'. A 'subjective story' made popular by a totalitarian establishment is thrust upon our psyche. If Art holds a mirror up to society, then it is high time we realize that the society of the Twentieth Century is not 'silver and exact', nor is it free from 'preconceptions'.

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